

# Light



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Cover picture: A spiral galaxy

# God is There

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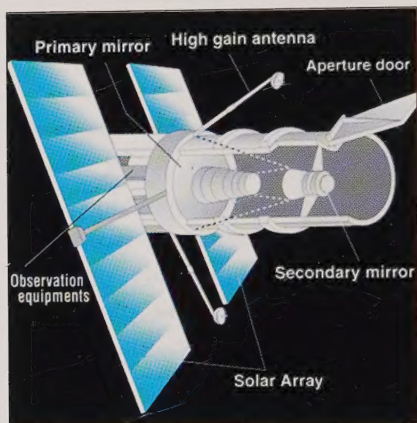


THERE IS A story about Napoleon. One evening he overheard his generals arguing. They were discussing the question '*Does God exist?*' Some thought the answer was '*No*'. Interrupting the argument and with a sweep of the hand towards the starlit sky, the Emperor enquired: '*That's all very well, gentlemen, but who made these?*'

Napoleon was not the first to have been awed by the night sky. A long time before him David king of Israel, surveying the wonder of the same scene had exclaimed:

'When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have ordained, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you visit him?' [*Psalm 8.3,4*].

Looking through today's powerful telescopes, astronomers can see a universe vastly greater than our ancestors ever dreamed of, a seeming limitless extent of heavenly bodies. The grandeur of the scene has produced a sense of deep humility in the minds of the world's greatest astronomers. Yet if we lay aside the telescope and take instead a



*The Hubble Telescope.*



*Microscope*

microscope the result is equally impressive. The complexity of the minutest forms of life and the precision with which they are constructed, makes us gasp in wonderment.

Can it really be that all these things occurred by chance?

### DESIGN

When we see machines which men have made we sometimes ask: 'who designed it? Who made it?' We would laugh if someone pointed to a car or to a camera and tried to tell us that '*it made itself - it just happened!*' But the most elaborate man-made machinery is crudely simple when compared with the life forms with which nature surrounds us. It is therefore illogical to suppose that life could come into being spontaneously – that it could just happen.

Why then do so many people argue that it can? Is it because they wish to avoid the personal obligations resulting from belief in a Creator?

## INTERDEPENDENCE IN NATURE

Nature provides an inexhaustible supply of fascinating information for those who study it. Plant life and animal life work together for mutual well being and survival. Which came first, bee or flower? Both must have been created virtually together, for neither could long survive alone.

There are very many examples of this interdependence. There is for example, a species of moth called the Pronuba moth which alone can achieve pollination of the Yucca flower. This moth possesses two unique structural features which enable her to lay eggs in the only place where they can develop, inside the flower of the yucca plant - no other will do. The moth is specially equipped to lay her egg right at the base of the pistil where the seedpod is found. Her grubs will feed on Yucca seeds and nothing else.



*Moth on Yucca flower*



*Yucca plant*

The complicated procedure by which the egg is laid is the only means by which the flower can be pollinated, so providing the seeds necessary for survival of both plant and moth. But the moth that performs this task derives no benefit herself; she is incapable of feeding upon the flower. All her work is for the benefit of her offspring and of the one plant, which can sustain them.

Who taught the Pronuba moth to do this?

### THE BALANCE OF NATURE

Modern scientific man has tried to improve on this balance, to eliminate one species, to encourage another species for his own short-term ends. What calamities have followed this tampering with the existing order! The unnatural introduction of the American grey squirrel into the UK is a striking example. It was a disastrous thing to do and the mistake has been discovered –too late! The result is that the native red squirrel has almost been wiped out.

Wisdom greater than man's - Divine wisdom was beyond doubt responsible for the exquisitely contrived universe. Long before civilised man learned to fly, to build bridges, to construct dams, the engineering problems involved in such feats had been solved.

Time and again it has been found that modern invention has been anticipated by the lowly creatures around us – radar by the bat, dam building by the beaver. The bee constructs a hive with a mathematical precision that is truly awe-inspiring.



The migrating bird performs his long journeys navigating over thousands of miles with unerring instinct. The Arctic tern for instance, sets off from the vicinity of the North Pole at the age of six weeks and makes its way to the Antarctic regions eleven thousand miles away, returning after winter to the

same nesting place in the North. As a feat of physical endurance this is marvel enough; how birds overcome the navigational problems involved in such a journey is still an unsolved mystery.

Who gave to all these creatures such prodigious abilities?

#### QUESTION AND ANSWER

The question was posed long, long ago:

‘Who has put wisdom in the mind? ...Who can number the clouds by wisdom? ...Can you hunt the prey for the lion? ...Do you know the time when the wild mountain goats bear young? ...Does the hawk fly by your wisdom, and spread its wings towards the south?...Does the eagle mount up at your command, and make its nest on high?’

*[Job 38.36,37,39; 39.1,26,27]*

There can be only one answer to such questions. Job, prostrating himself before God confessed:

‘I know that you can do everything, and that no purpose of yours can be withheld from you.’

*[Job 42.2]*

Beholding this wonderful universe around us, we too should be humble. Human achievements are really very small by comparison.

#### BEAUTY IN NATURE

Have you ever considered how beauty and usefulness are combined in nature? This too is significant. Plant and animal life, besides supplying our clothing also provide as a kind of ‘bonus’ beauty of form and colour to delight the eye. Birdsong, babbling brook and rustling trees to gladden our ears.

Every creature not only makes its contribution to the practical working of the whole; each has its particular beauty to give us pleasure. Was this accidental too? If all things evolved by chance on an entirely functional basis, then beauty would be superfluous.



*Springtime in Virginia USA*

Solomon expressed the simple truth when he acknowledged that both beauty and wisdom are of God:

‘He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also he has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end’ [*Ecclesiastes 3.11*].

These words of Solomon hint at an important fact that has not yet been considered. The wonders of nature proclaim the existence of God and the design which is everywhere apparent, speaks of His wisdom and omnipotence. However such fields of study tell us nothing of a purpose, if any, behind the creation. Yet it is inconceivable that all this creative skill should have been employed without any overall purpose worthy of such wisdom.

It is to the Bible, God's revelation to man that we must go to learn of the Creator's purpose. The Bible as we have seen, directs our attention to nature's evidence of the Creator's existence. It speaks moreover of man as the crowning work of God – *'fearfully and wonderfully made'* [Psalm 139.14]. God created man in his own image. That is, man was endowed with mortal faculties, the ability to understand right and wrong.

### MORAL CHOICE

Man's part in God's purpose is to give God pleasure by willing obedience, by choosing right and refusing wrong. From the beginning this has been the moral choice confronting every man and woman and with dreadful consistency each generation has chosen the evil and refused the good, thereby denying and displeasing their Creator.

The Scriptures call upon man to forsake his chosen path of godlessness, to abandon his foolish ideas of self-sufficiency and to admit that he needs a helping hand to deliver him from ruin. God is merciful – He will forgive.

The Bible tells us of his love in providing a Saviour who has *'abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel'* [2 Timothy 1.10]. If we can bring ourselves to be humble enough to read God's Word it will tell us all we need to know about the grand design which He has for the earth and humanity. *'God...did not create it in vain'* we are told, He *'formed it to be inhabited'* [Isaiah 45.18].

### GOD'S PURPOSE IN CREATION

The same infinite wisdom which designed the universe in all its detail and marvellous variety is also shaping its destiny. We shall not however learn about this by studying the stars, or the plants or the insects.' Zophar, one of Job's three friends asked him: *'Canst thou by searching find out God?'* [Job 11.7 AV]

No, we must study the Bible, which alone reveals God's purpose and shows how individual men and women can have a part in it. Such a study will open to us the vista of a glorious future, a future in all respects worthy of the Almighty Creator. Revealing to us the true destiny of mankind, it will bring us peace of mind now and a real hope for the future.

But time is not on our side. We just cannot afford to put such important matters off to some other time when it's more convenient. Today we are alive: but who knows how many more days we may have after this one? Because when our day is done our opportunity has vanished **forever!**

This is the appeal of the Bible:

**'Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters...Incline your ear, and come to me...Hear, and your soul shall live' [Isaiah 55.1,3].**

*Editors Note: This article was written by the late Martin Evans. For further information on this subject, send for your free copy of the special issue entitled 'Light on Creation'*

# What did Jesus mean?

## ‘before Abraham was, I AM’

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THE BIBLE TEACHES that God has a definite plan for the earth – to send Jesus back to the earth to destroy all forms of human government and set up the world-wide, everlasting Kingdom of God. All true believers will be rewarded with the gift of eternal life in that Kingdom. These facts are crucial to a correct understanding of the teaching of Jesus including this verse found in John’s Gospel record [*John 8.58*]. An incorrect understanding makes a nonsense of all Bible teaching about the Kingdom of God and the sacrifice of Jesus. A proper understanding of Jesus’ teaching is therefore of personal benefit to us all.

### THE JEWS AND ABRAHAM

To the Jews, Abraham is the greatest man who ever lived. They consider themselves the children or descendants of Abraham. Indeed so arrogant were they about their great ancestor, that Jesus had to remind the Jews of his day that in the sight of God the real children of Abraham were those who did *‘the works of Abraham.’* He said to them: *‘If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham’* [*John 8.39*].

By this Jesus meant that obedience to God and faith in his promises counted for much more than historical descent, important as that was. On many occasions the Jews were wilfully ignorant and slow to understand and Jesus often left them to their blindness by his use of enigmatic sayings. His saying *‘Before Abraham was, I AM’* is a good example of this. In fact we find a number of mysterious sayings of Jesus recorded in John, which can only be correctly and consistently

understood by keeping in mind the principles outlined in the opening verses of John's Gospel record.

#### SUPPOSED SUPPORT FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Those who believe in the doctrine of the Trinity find many of their favourite supporting passages in the Gospel record of John. If this is indeed a Scriptural doctrine it is strange that so little support for it is to be found in the other gospel records. The fact that only in John are so many apparent references to the Trinity found, should make us pause for thought. Why should such an important doctrine find little or no support in Matthew, Mark and Luke, if it really is Bible teaching.

The key to understanding this and many other passages in John is to be found in the early verses of John chapter one. Concerning John the Baptist we read:

‘He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light’ [*John 1.8*].

John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus. So we read about the Light that was Jesus:

‘He came to his own, and his own did not receive him’ [*John 1.11*].

This was exactly the attitude of the Jews to Jesus, for then we go on to read:

‘But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name’ [*John 1.12*].

This was just what Jesus did by his preaching to the nation of Israel – to show them the way of salvation.

### JESUS THE WORD MADE FLESH

The coming of Jesus to Israel is described as the coming of the Word: *'And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us'* [John 1.14]. John the Baptist proclaimed that the Word made flesh was Jesus: *'John bore witness of him and cried out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, He that comes after me is preferred before me, for he was before me"'* [John 1.15].

### HOW WAS JESUS BEFORE JOHN?

John acknowledged that even though Jesus came after him in the chronological sequence of events, yet Jesus was greater than him. Jesus was born six months after John the Baptist, yet here John says that Jesus came before him. Obviously this can only mean that Jesus was more important than John. It cannot mean that Jesus physically existed before John because that was simply not the case.

Similarly, later in the same chapter we read: *'The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him, and said, "Behold ! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, After me comes a man who is preferred before me, for he was before me"'* [John 1.29,30].

Again John the Baptist acknowledged that Jesus was *'before'* him in the sense of being *'preferred before'* him. Therefore Jesus was greater than John. Again it would be absurd to think John meant that Jesus physically existed before him, because historically the opposite was true as John was six months older than Jesus.

It is in this sense that we should understand Jesus' words in our title verse. Jesus was *'before'* Abraham in the sense of being even greater than him. So incensed were the Jews at this assertion that they attempted to stone Jesus but he escaped. In the Jews' view, no-one could possibly be greater than Abraham.

## THE PLACE OF JESUS IN THE PURPOSE OF GOD

Just as they did not understand that natural descent did not in fact make them the children of Abraham, so they did not understand the pre-eminent place of Jesus in the purpose of God. Because of their blindness, wilful as it was, Jesus reproved them: *'if you do not believe that I am he, you will die in your sins'* [John 8.24]. Then in response to their question, *'Who are you?'* Jesus said: *'Just what I have been saying to you from the beginning'* [John 8.25].

From the beginning of his ministry Jesus had taught and demonstrated (by the miracles) that he was the Son of God, at the very centre of God's purpose. The statement *'before Abraham was, I AM'*, was in response to the Jews' credulity at his previous remark to them: *'Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad'* [John 8.56].

The Jews thought that Jesus meant he was contemporary with Abraham who lived around 2000 years before him. This was not what Jesus meant. Actually he meant that Abraham recognised the coming of Jesus as the means by which the great promises which God made to him, would be fulfilled.

So we can read in the letter to the Hebrews: *'These all died in faith, (including Abraham, - see verse 8) not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off'* [Hebrews 11.13]. Obviously this must mean far off in time, in the then-distant future. It was in this sense that Abraham rejoiced to see the coming day of Christ. The passage does not teach, (and there is no need to try to make it teach) that Jesus physically existed in the time of Abraham.

## THE PROMISE TO ABRAHAM

In the book of Genesis we can read of Abraham's reaction when God promised that he would be the father of the promised Messiah. After challenging Abraham to count the stars, God said to him, *'So*

*shall your descendants be' [Genesis 15.5]. And Abraham's reaction was: '...he believed in the LORD, and he accounted it to him for righteousness' [Genesis 15.6].*

In Genesis chapter 22 we read of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, then of God's further promise to him:

*'...your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice' [Genesis 22.17,18].*

Abraham foresaw the coming day of Christ. He foresaw Christ's death and resurrection after the pattern of his own offering of Isaac and he saw the world-wide blessings which would accrue from Christ's offering. This was all in prospect. In this sense and in this sense only, Jesus was in existence in and even before the time of Abraham. It was in this anticipatory sense that Abraham saw the day of Christ and rejoiced.

Jesus was saying that he was at the centre of God's purpose to fill the earth with his own glory through the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham. Because of Jesus' crucial role in God's plan, and because Abraham looked forward to the fulfilment of God's promises, Jesus was indeed greater than Abraham. In this sense was Jesus 'before' Abraham. This statement of Jesus was the logical response to the question posed by the Jews:

*'Are you greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? And the prophets are dead. Whom do you make yourself out to be?' [John 8.53]*

Jesus was indeed greater than Abraham and therefore entitled to the Jews' respect. Jesus was greater (or before) Abraham in that he was at the heart of God's plan. In fact Jesus was essential in every way to the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham.

## TRINITARIAN VIEWS

Trinitarians argue that John 8.58 teaches that Jesus said he was the '*I AM*' of the Old Testament. Moses asked God:

'...they say to me, "What is his name?" What shall I say to them? And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." and he said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, I AM has sent me to you."'

[Exodus 3.14]

Therefore the Trinitarians argue that Jesus must be God. This is faulty reasoning; saying '*I AM*', does not make a person God. In John chapter 9 we read of the man born blind whom Jesus restored to sight: '*Some said, 'This is he'. Others said, 'He is like him'. He said, 'I am he' [John 9.9].*' The word '*he*' at the end of the verse is in italics to denote that it was not in the original Greek manuscripts. The man actually said '*I am*' but no-one would say that he was claiming to be God.

In the book of Acts we read: '*And Paul said, I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains' [Acts 26.29].*' Paul used the expression '*I am*' about himself but no-one would say that Paul was claiming to be God. Or again in Acts we read that Peter said to the deputation from Cornelius: '*Yes, I am he whom you seek' [Acts 10.21].*' It is the same expression but no-one would say that Peter was claiming to be God.

These examples show that saying, '*I am*' does not make a person God. The Greek words translated '*I am*', are *ego eimi*. Many times in the New Testament these words are translated '*I am he*' (e.g. Mark 13.6; Luke 21.8; John 8.24, 13.19) or '*It is I*' (e.g. Matthew 14.27; Mark 6.50). In none of these places is it either necessary or consistent to believe that Jesus was referring to himself as God. Only in John 8.58 are the words, *ego eimi*, translated '*I am*'. If it had been

translated consistently with other passages as, '*I am he*', or, '*It is I*', it would have been easier to see that Jesus was speaking of himself as the one who was the heart and pivot of God's purpose, the one to whom Abraham looked forward and whose coming he anticipated.

#### DID JESUS EXIST BEFORE ABRAHAM?

The only way in which Jesus existed at or before the time of Abraham was in the sense that Jesus was from the very beginning in the mind and purpose of God. Peter explains this in his first letter:

'...you were not redeemed with corruptible things...but with the precious blood of Christ...he indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was made manifest in these last times for you' [1 Peter 1.18-20].

Before his birth Jesus existed only in the sense that God had already planned to provide a Saviour and Redeemer. Believers have likewise been chosen by God right from the beginning: '*just as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world*' [Ephesians 1.4]. But no-one would maintain that men and women physically existed before they were born. So why should it be thought of Jesus?

#### THE TRAGEDY OF FALSE BELIEF

Just as the Jews could not understand what Jesus said to them, sadly there are many today who seek to make Jesus teach what he is not teaching. In the process they miss the glorious truth about the fulfilment of God's plan to fill the earth with his glory in the Kingdom of God.

Acceptance of the doctrine of the Trinity causes its adherents to fail to understand the Bible's teaching about the redeeming work of Jesus. As a result they cannot benefit from the Divine plan centred in Jesus and the true hope of salvation that the Bible offers.

So we appeal to you the reader to examine the true Scriptural teaching about Jesus and about God's plan for the world and place yourself on the road to the Kingdom of God. Then you will be counted by God as Abraham's '*seed*' or spiritual descendants and you will be able to look forward to the resurrection from the dead if you die before Jesus returns.

This is the real Bible teaching about life after death. Like Abraham you will be able to look forward to everlasting life in the glorious Kingdom of God on earth.

Clifford Wharton  
Surrey, UK



*The Prodigal Son returns to his father (see page 22)*

# Parables of Jesus

## The Prodigal Son

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CONTINUING OUR SERIES on parables we have selected the 'Parable of the Prodigal Son', although the word 'Prodigal' does not appear in the biblical text. In more modern English translations it is simply entitled the 'Parable of the Lost Son'. 'Prodigal' is an old English word that means someone who is recklessly wasteful. It is also connected with the word '*prodigus*', a Latin word that means 'lavish'. So this is a story about a wasteful son who initially becomes lost. A close reading of Luke chapter 15 reveals a number of metaphors concerning God's relationship with the Jews and those He considers to be His children.

The parable is principally about repentance, the regaining of lost righteous ways and the establishment of a relationship with God. But it is also about arrogance and ignorance of the meaning of repentance and religious piety. The verses in the chapter that cover this parable can be divided into three parts:

- Behaviour Luke 15.11-19.
- Repentance Luke 15.20-24.
- The attitude of the older son Luke 15.25-32.

### THE PHARISEES

What prompted Jesus to tell such a parable? He was in the company of the Pharisees and lawgivers. Luke's record is the only one of the four divinely inspired Gospel writers that records this parable. However, we know from all of the Gospel records that the Pharisees, as religious leaders of the people and controllers of the law were in

Christ's view hypocrites. On numerous occasions Jesus challenged them and publicly dispensed strong criticism of them. They made loads difficult for their fellow countrymen to bear [*Matthew 23.4*]. They were legal technicians that ignored the true purpose of God's law and they used it to control their fellow men [*Luke 11.42*]. They also did things like making long prayers in public and saw themselves as very superior to the majority of their contemporaries. They loved to be greeted in the market places and to receive the higher seats at feasts and gatherings [*Luke 20.46*]. Matthew's Gospel record chapter 23 gives a good insight into the behaviour of these people.

If you read through from Luke chapter 11 to Luke chapter 15 you will understand how things were developing between Jesus and the Pharisees. It was these people who eventually had Jesus arrested and turned him over to the Romans to be crucified. They didn't like Jesus' approach to the spreading of the Gospel message and they didn't recognise him as the Son of God, their long awaited Messiah. Their behaviour demonstrated religious arrogance and religious piety.

In exercising this they kept themselves high above the common man. They worked to ensure their perfection through what can be described as fanatical and blind adherence to their distorted and extended version of the Mosaic Law. Anyone who did not conform exactly to these attitudes and behaviours were sinners and outcasts. They saw the Law as an end in itself to be obeyed rather than a means to an end, that is, a means of doing service to and pleasing God. This is succinctly described in the opening words of Luke chapter 15 where we read:

‘Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to him (Jesus) to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”’

[*Luke 15.1*]

## THE LOVE OF GOD

Jesus told the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the prodigal or lost son to those gathered around him. He did this to explain the richness of God's love for people who try to serve him and also to demonstrate the fact that forgiveness of sins is available to any who truly repent.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is about a man who was a farmer. His younger son wants to take his inheritance early and go off and enjoy it. The father allows him to do this. The son packs up everything that he has and leaves. The parable demonstrates here that God who is the Father of all, allows us to behave in any way we wish. Although He has the power to stop us, He does in fact allow us to use his wealth - the breath of life we are given at birth and all of the things He gives us, in any way we please during our lives.

## THE WRONG CHOICE

However, the Bible demonstrates that God loves those who obey Him of their own free will and clearly teaches that going our own way or doing our own thing, leads to the endless oblivion of death. The farmer allowed the Prodigal Son free choice of action. He took his inheritance and used it as he wanted. That is exactly what we do if we choose not to follow God's ways. The result is that when the resource of our life is used up we are destitute and fit only to die, entering the eternal oblivion of death.

Soon the Prodigal Son hit hard times, he had no friends and none of the wealth left that he took with him. He had no food, not even the money to buy food and the country he was in then suffered a dire famine. To survive he was compelled to take the lowest kind of work he could get - tending pigs on a farm. It is important to remember that Jesus was telling this parable to the Pharisees who were Jews like himself. The emphasis of the parable is deliberately tough here. Under the Law of Moses, the Jews should have no contact with pigs

because they were designated as unclean animals. They should not eat it or touch its carcase [*Leviticus 11.7; Deuteronomy 14.8*].

At the start of Luke chapter 15 we note how the Pharisees demonstrated that they would not only avoid pigs but also 'sinners'. They didn't like the fact that Jesus mixed with sinners. So this part of the parable emphasises that the Prodigal Son was firstly wayward from his father and secondly a complete sinner because he was disobedient to the Law of Moses, the very thing the Pharisees obeyed to the letter. The Prodigal Son could sink no lower than this. It signifies the utter desolation of our own status. If we do not follow God's ways we place our lives in a famine situation and are bankrupt of everything that is needed to sustain life on an eternal basis. We are completely destitute and on the wrong side of His Law.

#### THE RIGHT CHOICE

The Prodigal Son comes to his senses. He realises that he is in a terrible predicament and he will die if left in the situation he is in. He reasons that his father's servants back home, even the very least of them are fed and watered and cared for. Jesus was hitting at the Pharisees by showing that self righteous superiority is not what God wants. On the contrary, the lesson Jesus was showing them was that the worst case of humanity can reasonably decide to repent and return to the Father.

These things are recorded in the Holy Scriptures as a powerful lesson for us to learn from too. If we have no focus on God and no interest in what He wants from us, we are effectively like the Prodigal Son, living a life where we use up our resources on pleasing ourselves. Although he is a lost case he decides to repent and we can do exactly the same thing. In the same way that he decides to go back and offer himself as a hired servant to his father, we too can repent of our lost status. We are naturally speaking lost like the prodigal son because naturally we are wayward and do not have a good relationship with God.

OUR TRUE STATE

The Apostle reminds us of our true state as descendants of Adam:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.

*[Romans 5.12].*

The Bible is very clear that we are alienated from God because we are human and have inherited at birth the sinful nature of Adam. But we can repent like the Prodigal Son and we can get back to God. The greatness and glorious attitude of God towards any of his creation who genuinely turn to Him is illustrated by Jesus to the Pharisees and to us in this parable.

The son heads for home; he is hungry and his clothes are in rags; he has fed pigs; so he smells; he is the lowest order of humanity to look at. The Pharisees were experts at condemning people like this. Take a look at this passage a bit farther on in Luke's Gospel record, for it really illustrates the point of this parable. Jesus is condemning the Pharisees and anyone who thinks that they are religiously superior:

'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank you, that I am not like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess. And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted'

*[Luke 18. 10-14].*

### THE PRODIGAL RETURNS

The Pharisee was so sure that the sinner was in an irrevocable position and he himself was a great man and saved. But the events of the parable of the Prodigal Son show us God's perspective on this.

When the son was a great way off his father saw him and ran to meet him. The picture is one of the most emotionally charged images that appear in the Scriptures. He is returning with the intention of apologising and committed to be a hired servant. But his father will not hear even the slightest suggestion. The son is clothed and bejewelled. A fatted calf is killed and a feast prepared to celebrate his return, to celebrate his repentance, to celebrate the fact that he was lost and is now found. In the parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus has already told his audience that there is joy in heaven over the repentance of one sinner more than the 99 who are already justified.

So the lesson for the Pharisees that day and the lesson for us today is that we need to be humble and recognise that we are only worthy of being at best, hired servants. In recognition of this, God will accept us as His sons and daughters. In other parts of the Scriptures, robes and jewellery being bestowed on individuals signifies the giving of eternal life as a reward for obedience to God. (For example see Revelation chapter 3 verse 5)

### THE PHARISEES CONDEMNED

The last third of the parable has an uncomfortable twist to it for the Pharisees and for anyone who thinks that they are justified by their own religious piety. Remember it is a lesson for the Pharisees and any who read it to today. The eldest son was always with the father. His claim was that he did everything well. He became angry when he found out what the music and merriment at the feast was all about. In his own eyes he had great status, he had never gone astray from his father like the younger son had. He lists all things that he has done [Luke 15.29,30]. These verses are a testimony to the attitude of the Pharisees in particular towards wayward sinners.

The eldest son will not recognise the Prodigal Son as his brother referring to him in conversation with his father as '*your son*' and not '*my brother*'. This was a direct comment by Jesus on the Pharisees behaviour. They could not accept sinners or the company of sinners. One of the reasons that they could not perceive that Jesus was the Messiah was because, unlike them in their religious piety, he sometimes kept the company of sinners. There was no need for anger and malice on the part of the elder brother. Everything that the father had was to be his.

### LOST AND FOUND

The keynote of the whole parable is the final verse:

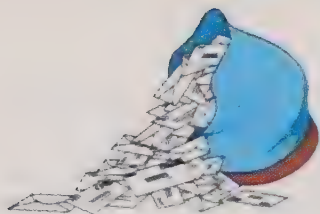
'It was right that we should make merry and be glad,  
for your brother was dead and is alive again, and  
was lost and is found' [*Luke 15.32*].

The Prodigal Son was dead and is alive, was lost and is found. God wants every man to repent of his natural ways and to be gathered to Him as little children.

'The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as  
some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward  
us, not willing that any should perish but that all  
should come to repentance' [*2 Peter 3.9*].

Our key objective as individuals should be to search the Scriptures and determine what action is required that reflects true repentance and that recognises our need for forgiveness and leads us to the ultimate reward from our Heavenly Father.

John Meadows  
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## ***From our Mail Bag***

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A READER HAS asked the question: *'Is one religion as good as another?'*

Some years ago a movement was formed called 'Christian Action.' Its aims were to promote inter-denominational co-operation among Christian churches in the UK in response to social needs. Whilst such action was commendable they said: *'there can be the fullest co-operation without the necessity of first settling questions of dogma and differing liturgical tradition'*. The objective of this fellowship is to discover in the *'Christian way of life, a moral energy, and new dynamic in democracy, as an alternative to the mystique of Communism'*.

In this generalisation of the *'Christian way of life'* and the setting aside of all *'questions of dogma and differing liturgical traditions'*, we are again being told that the principle of our beliefs are of no vital importance and that one religion is as good as another. If we insist upon doctrinal enlightenment as a condition of all action and acceptance before God, this is a sign of narrow-mindedness and bigotry.'

This popular spirit of 'liberality' in matters of religious conviction, is with the vast majority of Christians but the perilous excuse for ignorance of divine teaching. No 'fellowship' out of harmony with what the Apostle Paul styles *'the unity of the Spirit'* and *'the unity of the faith'* [Ephesians 4.3,13] can be a true expression of the Christian *'way of life'*.

## CONVICTED OF FOLLY

The Bible convicts men of folly who are ignorant of its teachings and holds them to be fools if, knowing its teaching, they do not believe and obey it. Hence the ancient world, whose wisdom was based on the philosophy of the Greeks, was described by the Apostle Paul as a world of 'foolishness' [1 Corinthians 1.20]. The reason is that men's thoughts have always been antagonistic to God's thoughts and His way. The prophet Isaiah declares of God: *'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.'* [Isaiah 55.8,9].

These 'thoughts' constitute the 'wisdom that is from above'. No man or woman knows this instinctively. Let us bear in mind the warning of the Apostle Paul: *'Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool, that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their own craftiness"'* [1 Corinthians 3,18,19].

## THE CONDITIONS OF SALVATION

Let us then examine further this idea that one religion is as good as another. Sometimes we hear it said *'it does not matter what we believe providing our life is right.'* To the orthodox believers in popular theology 'general goodness and moral worth' are the grounds for divine acceptance without any reference to understanding, belief and obedience of the Divine teaching in the Gospel. If this is true, then the Scriptures are of no authority!

Definite conditions of salvation are clearly stated in the Word of God. Understanding and belief of the Gospel is the first condition of salvation. Those to whom it was first preached were required to believe it exactly as it was preached to them by the Apostles: those who rejected it would be condemned [Romans 1.16; Galatians 1.8,9].

### A DIRECT CHALLENGE

The 'belief' here required was a direct challenge to the human 'philosophy' then current and now universally prevalent. (See Paul's words to the First Century believers in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 18 to 25). Knowledge precedes belief for as Paul wrote to the Romans: *'...how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? [Romans 10.14].*

It is most important then to discover what is the Gospel preached by Jesus. If we examine the Scriptures, we find that the Gospel message was about the coming Kingdom of God *[Mark 1.14; Luke 8.1]*. The Apostles also preached the same message *[Acts 8.12, 19.8, 28.30-31]*.

It should be noted, in examining these references, that this Gospel was not exclusively a New Testament teaching. The Gospel was *'promised before through his prophets in the holy Scriptures'* *[Romans 1.2]*. The Apostle Paul particularly emphasised that the basis of his preaching was Moses and the Prophets *[Acts 28.23]*. It is therefore essential and reasonable to turn to the writings of the Old Testament in order fully to understand the Gospel.

### THE PROMISES

We will discover that important promises have been made by God to the fathers of Israel. These can be summed up in the promise to Abraham that *'in you shall all the families of the earth shall be blessed'* *[Genesis 12:1-3, 13:14-17, 17.6-8, 22.16-18]*. Abraham and many others will then come forth from their graves to the reward of the *'everlasting possession'* of the land of their sojourning long ago. They will inherit the Kingdom of God, for the land promised to Abraham will be the 'first dominion' of the Kingdom, the magnificent centre of Christ's universal rule and authority *[Micah 4.1-8, Acts 3.19-21]*.

As the Apostle Peter told the Jews in Jerusalem, all the Old

Testament prophets foretold the time when the fulfilment of these promises will bring universal blessedness and peace. We have only briefly referred to them to show the basis of the practical teaching of the New Testament. Both Christ and his Apostles preached the gospel of the Kingdom of God, believing all that the prophets had spoken concerning its establishment on the earth.

### DOES IT MATTER WHAT WE BELIEVE?

In the light of this teaching we can address ourselves particularly to the question: *'does it matter what we believe, or if we believe at all?'* There can be but one answer to these questions as the following references will prove. Ignorance of the truth of the Gospel is a fatal condition – by it we become *'alienated from the life of God'* [Ephesians 4.18].

On the other hand, the Apostle shows in this same letter to the Ephesian believers that the *'eyes'* of their *'understanding'* had been *'enlightened'*. In view of this new and privileged position, he further reminds them of the greatness of their hope:

*'that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what are the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints'* [Ephesians 1.18].

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner- stone.

[Ephesians 2.19,20]

Now a careful study of these and other references will show how vitally important it is to be enlightened in the truth of God's Word. So throughout the apostolic writings exhortations abound to *'hold fast'* to the Truth, to maintain its purity as the basis of association and to refuse fellowship with those who pervert it in belief and practice. [Romans 16.17,18; 2 Thessalonians 2.13 –15; 1 Timothy 6.3-5; 2 John 8-10]

If the reader is sufficiently interested and has examined these references he or she will see the emphasis upon 'doctrinal enlightenment' as a condition of acceptance before God. There is not the slightest suggestion in any of these references that being 'well meaning, sincere and good living people' is good enough in God's eyes. Modern sentimentality and compromise had no part in the life of the First Century Christians and the same must apply today.

We come back to the question posed by our reader: *'Is one religion as good as another?'* The Bible's answer is a definite NO!

We believe that soon the promise to Abraham will be realised and the Kingdom of God will be established on earth. At that time the words addressed to the nation of Israel by the prophet Jeremiah will become reality for all people: *'No more shall every man teach his neighbour...saying 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD' [Jeremiah 31.34].*

The prophet Isaiah gives us a word picture of the great change that will then take place – when there will only be one religion for all people: *'Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; And all nations shall flow to it...For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem' [Isaiah 2.2,3].*

In the words of one writer: *'The time will then come when God's own truth, expressed in God's own language, will form the universal creed of intelligent, harmonized and happy Christendom – when men's faith and affections will come into direct contact with Divine revelation: and the spirit of good will to men, which prompted heaven's message, will be felt in all its freshness and power - when the uproar of controversy is stilled, and its harsh and jarring discords shall have died away into everlasting silence'.*

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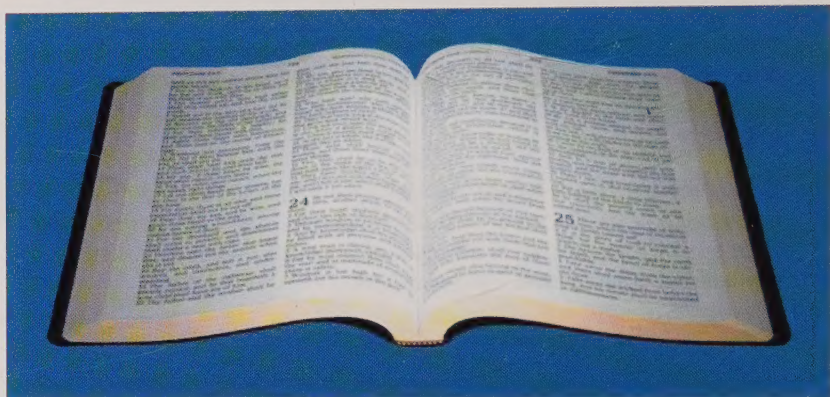
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